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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 001293

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SUBJECT: DOWNER PUSHES REFORM DURING VISIT TO RANGOON

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez. Reason: 1.5 (d).

11. (C) Summary: Australian Foreign Minister Downer told Than Shwe and Khin Nyunt that the GOB should move convincingly to open a political dialogue with the NLD "within the next one to two weeks." He also urged the government to free all political prisoners. Khin Nyunt replied that he "fully subscribed" to Downer's views on the need for prompt action on political transition; however, neither he nor Than Shwe made any commitments regarding a timetable for dialogue or the release of political prisoners. Aung San Suu Kyi welcomed Downer's visit ("every bit of help was needed"), but was resolutely skeptical about the GOB's plans for dialog. She told Downer that there was no dialog with the government and that she was not convinced that the GOB was committed to political change. She was also skeptical about Australian aid initiatives, including the Australian human rights training program. She was not opposed to assistance per se, provided it was "transparent, accountable, and independently monitored." However, she did object to any assistance whose "nature and manner" was determined by the government. End Summary.

12. (C) Australian Ambassador Trevor Wilson told diplomats October 4 that Australian Foreign Minister Downer had been nervous about the public reaction to his decision to visit Burma, but left satisfied with the results of the visit. He had come at the urging of UN Special Envoy Razali Ismail and wanted to convey Australia's views directly to Burma's leaders. That plus the opportunity to form his own views about the situation in Burma made for a good visit.

The Message

13. (C) Downer conveyed the same message in separate meetings with Senior General Than Shwe, Secretary 1 Khin Nyunt, Foreign Minister Win Aung, and Home Minister Tin Hlaing. Australia was concerned about the slow pace of political and economic change in Burma. It was essential, he said, that Burma move as soon as possible ("within one to two weeks") on political reform and transition in a way that was convincing to the international community. This basically meant substantive talks with the NLD on political transition. It was also essential that Burma publicize those moves and supplement them with measures to establish good faith, basically through the release of all political prisoners. Downer predicted that such moves would have "a big impact" internationally, and would help restart foreign investment flows for Burma.

14. (C) On the economy, Downer told both Than Shwe and Khin Nyunt that Burma had to adapt to globalization; it could not cut itself off from the world. It needed technocrats to run the economy and assistance to deal with its many humanitarian problems. Political transition, however, was the key. If it did not move forward on political transition, it would not get the support it needed from the world community.

Secretary One

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15. (C) In reply, Secretary 1 Khin Nyunt told Downer that he "fully subscribed" to Downer's views about taking steps to show that the process of political transition was on track. He also stated that that he believed it was essential that the GOB cooperate with UN Special Envoy Razali, UN Special Rapporteur Pinheiro, and the ILO. However, neither he nor Senior General Than Shwe made any commitments to Downer regarding the timing of any steps in regard to political transition. Neither did any member of the government make any commitments regarding the release of political prisoners.

16. (C) Khin Nyunt did claim that the dialog with the NLD was not stalled. He also called Aung San Suu Kyi's shift to "a more constructive approach" a very positive step, one that had allowed the government and the NLD to deal with each other on a basis of mutual understanding "like members of one family."

Than Shwe

17. (C) Than Shwe did not mention either the dialog or Aung San Suu Kyi. However, he did emphasize that he did not want

the military to remain in power forever, or ever again have to assume power in Burma. That was not good for the either the country or the military. Rather, he wanted to build a democratic system that would endure. For Burma, that required national unity, education, and economic development.

Than Shwe did not respond to Downer's points regarding the economy, but also did not object to Downer's grim description of Burma's economic prospects, and did not ask for any type of Australian assistance.

Home Minister Tin Hlaing

18. (C) Downer told Home Minister Tin Hlaing that there was no reason for the GOB to hold any political prisoners and that he hoped that all would be released quickly. He also told Tin Hlaing that Australia was very satisfied with its counternarcotics cooperation with Burma and had just decided to assign a second liaison officer from the Australian Federal Police to the Embassy in Rangoon. Australia was also happy with its human rights training for Burmese police officers, but wanted to expand the program to include organizations like the NLD. Tin Hlaing said that the GOB was "prepared to consider that," however, according to Ambassador Wilson, details on the expanded program still have to be worked out.

Aung San Suu Kyi

19. (C) Aung San Suu Kyi told Downer that she was glad he had come. "Every bit of help was needed," she said, to move the GOB forward on political transition. However, she stated categorically that no dialog was taking place with the government. She also said that there had been no significant contacts between the GOB and the NLD, and that she was not convinced that the GOB was committed to the process of political change. In regard to aid, she also told Downer that she was not opposed to any type of assistance for Burma, provided that assistance was "transparent, accountable, and independently monitored." However, she had reservations about any assistance provided to the government and "would not support" any assistance whose "nature and manner" was determined by the government. She was also skeptical about the value of Australia's human rights training for the government. Progress on human rights, she said, would depend on political change. No amount of training could substitute for that. She also said that she prefers a coordinated approach to aid; an approach that was coordinated among donors would have more impact on the GOB; it would also leave fewer "loopholes" for the government to exploit.

Comment

110. (C) It is hard to say what impact Downer's visit will have on the reform process here. His comments regarding political transition, the economy, and the growing humanitarian problems in Burma were certainly on the mark. However, it is hard to tell how seriously the government took those remarks. While Khin Nyunt asserted that he "fully subscribed" to Downer's views on the need for prompt and convincing motion in regard to political transition, Than Shwe did not take up that theme, nor did anyone else echo it. As usual, we will simply have to wait and see whether there is any significant motion over the next several weeks.

111. (C) The Australians' initiative on human rights training for organizations "like the NLD," and the Home Minister's response to that initiative, was also interesting. It may be that the GOB is now ready to consider opening the doors somewhat in regard to involving the NLD in assistance programs, if only as recipients. If true, even that would be a step forward, although the entire initiative still needs to be discussed with the NLD. According to Ambassador Wilson, Downer did not discuss Australia's plans for the program with Aung San Suu Kyi.

112. (C) Finally, it was gratifying to hear how direct Downer was with Than Shwe. According to Ambassador Wilson, Khin Nyunt and Win Aung had both asked Downer to go easy on Than Shwe and not be so rude as Japanese Foreign Minister Kawaguchi in raising awkward issues. To his credit, Downer ignored the GOB advice and followed Kawaguchi's example. Than Shwe needs to hear what Downer had to say and, in Post's view, it is good that Downer was willing to take the political risks and political heat associated with this visit in order to put his points across. End Comment.

Martinez